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# Crittenton Home

## **Imagine being a frightened, pregnant girl in 1883**

Hester Prynne's adjudicators forced her to wear a bright scarlet "A" on her chest a community-executed punishment for her unforgivable indiscretions. While the novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne was entitled *The Scarlet Letter*, it may just have easily been *The Red Badge of Courage*, as most today would agree that the punishment handed to Hester hardly fit the so-called crime.

The *Scarlet Letter* is a work of fiction, but it no doubt reflects the moral landscape that shaped America in the Nineteenth Century.

With those attitudes in mind, imagine being a young, frightened, unmarried pregnant girl in 1883. Your options are extremely limited. You may or may not have a supportive family and you know you do not have a supportive community.

Girls in New York had a place to go then, and soon girls all over the country, including Helena,

could find the relief and succor they so desperately needed behind the doors of the Florence Crittenton Homes.

When New York City druggist and millionaire, Charles Crittenton, lost his four year-old daughter, Florence, to scarlet fever, he made it his mission to tour the world helping "fallen" and "dissipated" girls and young women.

Butte sponsored the first Crittenton Home in Montana in 1896. When its doors closed shortly thereafter, Charles Crittenton directed his personal rail car, which he had christened "Good News," to Helena in hopes of enlisting the town's residents to support a new shelter. Crittenton lived and traveled in the rail car year round and upon arrival in a community, he would preside over a series of meetings and evangelical sermons at local churches.

He spoke frankly and directly about the plight of unwed young mothers, a subject rarely discussed in proper circles. An advertisement announcing an 1899 visit to Helena by Crittenton reads: "Mr. Chas. N. Crittenton of New York will speak on the Florence Mission Rescue Work, as carried on among our 'Erring Sisters' in New York...and many other cities." The handbill boasts of Crittenton's years of service work "from lowest dive and brothel to gilded palace." No doubt due to the frankness with which Crittenton spoke about so sensitive a subject, a small notation at the bottom of the advertisement reads: Children under 12 years of age not admitted."

On June 12, 1900, the City of Helena incorporated Montana's second Florence Crittenton Home "dedicated to the care and rehabilitation of unmarried mothers." Girls soon began knocking on the doors of the house, located on Hauser Boulevard, where it remained until 1926.

In 1925, as the residence on Hauser began bursting at the seams, Lana N. Cullum, superintendent of the Home, and a small group of interested Helenans gathered the \$2,000 necessary to acquire the Albert Kleinschmidt residence on 22 Jefferson Street.



*The Florence Crittenton home from 1927-1973.*

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The building once the grand, stately mansion of a Helena mining man, had fallen into disrepair and was in need of considerable attention. Friends of the Florence Crittenton Home, matrons, the superintendent, and the residents themselves hauled 34 truckloads of debris from the house. Any item left in the house with a potential use was pressed into service. Glass had to be imported from Great Falls, as there was not enough in Helena to replace all of the broken windows. Four years and \$15,000 later, the Florence Crittenton Home at 22 Jefferson



Street was capable of housing 55 girls and 30 children in comfort and elegance.

While residents at the Florence Crittenton Home were once referred to as “in-mates” and described as “fallen,” “erring” and dissipated,” the place has

never been intended as prison or hospital, rather a “harbor, a shelter and protection where, by best medical care and nursing, the young mothers and helpless children are made ready to get back to where they may take their rightful places in the affairs of life, where they are surrounded by Christian influences and practical teachings which give them a new vision and courage.”

In 1926, the average age of residents at the Home was 16, and one young mother was four days short of her twelfth birthday. Residents ran the gamut from homeless to wealthy to veterans’ wives in need of help while their husbands recovered in military hospitals; the only requirement for admission being need. Regardless of social standing, all of the girls received academic as well as domestic training to prepare them for re-entering the community. To the credit of the Home, and the residents themselves, many of the girls graduated with honors from high school and college, secured jobs, and led successful, happy lives.

Babies born to residents of the Home were placed in the nursery where some infants remained up to their first year. A sun room adjoined the nursery, and every day the infants enjoyed “health-giving sun rays” surrounded by three panels of glass while matrons schooled the young mothers in proper care and feeding of their new little charges.

A 1926 feature in the Helena Independent praises, “Probably no explanation by work or demonstration by fact could bring the message of the purpose and work of the Florence Crittenton Home as well as a visit to the nursery. The smiling, healthy little faces that peer out from under the soft wooly blankets in the cribs tell the story.” While the Home provided complete instruction on care of an infant, many young mothers realized that they could not provide the best possible care for their babies and opted for adoption.

Through its years of service, the Home remained not merely a nursery, but also a place where the mothers were provided the opportunity to hone academic, creative and social skills. Finding themselves in a difficult situation away from their families, however, not all of the girls adjusted with ease.

Adelaide Delorme, Director of the Home in 1962, said while the majority of girls take to their new surroundings and participate in group activities and projects, “there are some girls who just won’t do anything but sit and hate everyone,” adding “the girls here are no different than most other teenagers.” Delorme did note, though, that even the majority of those residents admitted they had been well treated by the time they leave.

The Florence Crittenton Home, the only establishment of its kind in Montana, has occupied five different spaces since its incorporation 95 years ago, the latest of which is a brand new complex on Harris Avenue. Nearly a century of residents at the Home (not to mention a century of new Montanans born to Crittenton Home occupants) have benefitted immeasurably from a bereaved New York City millionaire’s dream of providing shelter and support to those whom many would have written off, shut away, or abandoned. Today, the Florence Crittenton Home continues the earnest work it began so many years ago, providing education and therapeutic-based programs to ensure the delivery of healthy babies and the physical and emotional well-being of new mothers.

*Leanne Kurtz is a Helena native, a local historian and a regular contributor to the column.*